DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 751 FL 800 684

AUTHOR McGroarty, Mary
TITLE Cross-Cultural Issues in Adult ESL Literacy Classrooms. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education for Limited-English-Proficient Adults, Washington, DC.; National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-LE-93-04
PUB DATE Jul 93
CONTRACT RI89166001
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM NCLE, Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Literacy; *Cross Cultural Training; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; *English (Second Language); Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Sex; Student Role; Teacher Behavior; Teacher Expectations of Students; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest identifies some of the cultural factors that can influence learner and teacher behavior during classroom English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction. Four topic areas are discussed: roles of learners and teachers, gender-related issues; appropriate topics for instruction, and behavior at the site of instruction. Given the diversity of the student population along with the part-time and temporary nature of ESL instruction and the varied backgrounds of literacy instructors, it is impossible to offer guidelines for cross-cultural training that fits all adult ESL classrooms equally well. Only cross-cultural efforts that require ongoing mutual discovery and adaptation by both learners and teachers can provide the concrete guidance needed to insure that literacy instruction is culturally as well as linguistically compatible for all those involved. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LET)

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ERIC Digest

National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education
Cross-Cultural Issues in Adult ESL Literacy Classroom

By Mary McGroarty, Northern Arizona University

FL 800684

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July 1993
EDO-LE-93-04

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Cross-Cultural Issues in Adult ESL Literacy Classrooms

by Mary McGroarty, Northern Arizona University

Instructors in adult ESL classes in the United States need no reminder that their classrooms serve as a meeting place for learners of many and often disparate cultural backgrounds. They recognize, further, that for many learners, the ESL class serves the crucial function of cultural as well as linguistic orientation. Yet intellectual recognition of these issues does not always provide specific pedagogical direction; that demands not only the sound judgement born of training and experience, but also an understanding of the cultural factors that shape the actual processes of classroom instruction. This digest identifies some of the cultural factors that can influence learner and teacher behavior during classroom ESL literacy instruction.

Roles of learners and teachers

Expectations about educational roles that participants bring to the classroom influence not only their views of the class, but also their willingness to participate in different kinds of learning activities. In adult ESL classes, learners and teachers alike bring years of life experience and cultural knowledge to the instructional setting. Learners may bring to class the expectations regarding teacher relationships and behavior that prevailed in their home countries, especially if they had extensive schooling there (McCargar, 1993). Thus, learners from more traditional educational systems may expect teachers to behave in a more formal and authoritarian fashion during classes and may be displeased, puzzled, or offended if a teacher uses an informal instructional style, such as using first names in class or allowing learners to move freely around the room.

Learners may also want teachers to maintain a clearly ordered pattern of classroom activity and, perhaps, engage in extensive correction of grammatical form or pronunciation during all activities rather than at specified points in a lesson or not at all. Failure to conform to these ideals may give learners the impression of lazy or inadequate class preparation on the part of the teacher.

Teachers, similarly, bring to the classroom their own expectations regarding teacher behavior. This includes their views on appropriate adult behavior within American culture in general, as well as in the classroom (McGroarty & Galván, 1985). If the American adult ideal is to be self-reliant, at ease in expressing and defending personal opinions, and interested in personal advancement, teachers will expect to provide instruction addressed to these goals and may unconsciously attribute these same goals to their students. The potential for conflicting expectations and evaluations of behavior between teachers and learners is evident.

Gender-related issues

Related to the issue of expectations regarding appropriate adult behavior is that of appropriate gender-related behavior, which can produce tensions during instruction. Teachers need to find out whether learners have ever experienced mixed educational groupings; whether they expect male and female teachers to behave differently; and how different classroom activities, including various group configurations (pairs or small groups) or activity types (e.g., role plays or dialogue practice), might affect learners differently because of their native cultural constraints. For example, in an adult ESL class some years ago, eager to put the desks in a circle to promote interaction and communication, I was concerned to see that, after a few minutes, one of the men in the class turned nearly rigid and stared straight ahead. When I asked after class what was wrong, he told me that with the class sitting in a circle, and thus moving their heads to look at me and each other when conversing, he was sure the other men were looking at his wife, a behavior he considered inappropriate. Had I explained clearly why a different arrangement of desks might be useful for classroom activities and been willing to alter the classroom configuration to accommodate specific needs, I might have prevented such unnecessary distress.

Additionally, ESL teachers need to be aware that shifts in status and economic and family responsibilities that often accompany immigration are likely to affect learners'—especially women's—very presence in class, as well as their attitudes and behaviors. Prospective female learners are often prevented from attending ESL classes by lack of childcare (Hayes, 1989), a factor that does not affect men as profoundly. In many Western immigrant-receiving countries, such as the United States, women may be encouraged to pursue educational goals that run counter to traditional expectations within their native countries (Paige, 1990). The need to seek employment outside the home may put pressure on women to learn English quickly, even as they recognize that this challenges traditional family structures. Moreover, men from more traditional cultural backgrounds may discourage or resist the efforts of wives or daughters to pursue literacy skills (Gillespie, in press).

In encouraging women students to speak up and take an active role in class, ESL instructors may encounter reluctance from both men and women from cultures in which women have historically been constrained by social roles that do not promote active participation in mixed-sex settings (Massin, 1992). One solution proposed in Australia has been literacy classes for women only (Rado & Foster, 1991). Teachers can also make special efforts to structure activities so that all learners, not just those who volunteer, have equal opportunities for practice and discussion.

Appropriate topics for instruction

Cultural expectations regarding the nature of education and what is appropriate to talk about may also affect the kinds of topics students are willing to pursue in class. Cultural as well as personal sensitivity is vital in knowing if, when, and how to introduce topics or lessons that may be distasteful or difficult. For example, lessons

on fast food might need to incorporate information on how to determine presence or absence of pork if learners' cultural affiliation includes religious prohibitions against eating it. Even apparently innocuous topics can be sources of difficulty, depending on the experience, sophistication level, and particular social situation of learners. Learners who are recent refugees from civil strife, for example, may find it hard to produce descriptions of the homes they had to flee in fear, particularly during their initial period of adjustment. If learners are still in the process of resolving their immigration status, they may feel threatened by question-answer sessions based on individual information such as "Where were you born?"; "How long did you live in X?"; and "Do you have a job?".

Clearly, instructor discretion is essential in these areas. Sensitive topics can be raised—indeed, some newer adult literacy materials make a point of acknowledging personally difficult situations of loneliness, isolation, or job loss that affect adult ESL learners (see Long & Spiegel-Podnecky, 1988, and Weinstein-Shr, 1992, for two texts that deal tactfully with potentially sensitive issues)—but the way they are treated and the extent of student participation expected should allow a range of alternatives, including the option to simply observe activities or, where possible, respond in writing rather than speaking up.

Behavior at the site of instruction

Culturally specific expectations regarding appropriate behavior in public places such as schools affect the entire instructional environment, including classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, and restrooms. Hence, rules regarding appropriate ways to maintain order; move or not move furniture such as desks and tables; discard litter; and regulate eating, drinking, and smoking can affect the comfort level of learners, teachers, and others associated with adult ESL instruction.

Like many areas of cultural customs, these areas can seem trivial until behavior that is different from the expected occurs; a breach of the cultural compact related to school site behavior then has a negative impact on instruction. Teachers, custodians, administrators, and perhaps other students may become annoyed if some adult learners engage in behavior that is permitted in their own countries but frowned upon in the United States, whether this involves smoking at the instructional site or appropriate ways to arrange classroom furniture or use a Western-style toilet. In one large Los Angeles adult school, some of these issues were deemed so crucial to a good instructional atmosphere that a committee of teachers developed special materials to orient learners to American cultural expectations and provide all participants—learners, teachers, and other staff members—with guidelines (Ryan, 1989).

Developing literacy instructors' cross-cultural expertise

Tremendous student diversity, coupled with the part-time and temporary nature of ESL instruction and the varied backgrounds of literacy instructors, makes it both impossible and inadvisable to offer a universal template for cross-cultural training that fits all adult ESL classrooms equally well. Several staff development formats are available for instructor training, ranging from in-service workshops, to conferences, to action research and self-directed learning (Kutner, 1992); cross-cultural topics can be incorporated into any of them. Models and materials for generic cross-cultural training are also widely available (for example, Bhawuk, 1990; Damen, 1987).

However, published sources may not be current or particular enough to provide instructors with the site-specific information and techniques they need (McGroarty, 1993). Following the growing trend toward participatory instruction, cross-cultural training for instructors needs to become participatory in a dual sense: Instructors need to participate in designing their own training opportunities in local instructional programs, and they need to learn how to participate with learners in identifying culturally appropriate instructional processes, topics, and materials that promote language progress (see Auerbach, 1992, for discussion and strategies). Only cross-cultural efforts that require ongoing mutual discovery and adaptation by both learners and teachers can provide the concrete guidance needed to insure that literacy instruction is culturally as well as linguistically compatible for all those involved.

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